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Don't deport Superman

BY RYAN STARK LILIENTHAL

“**L**ook, up in the sky. It's a bird, it's a plane, it's Superman.” For me, no comic book superhero better represents strength, integrity and kind spirit than Superman. If allowed just one superhero, I want Superman on my side. I believe that many Americans feel the same way. In fact, Superman's creators show him standing for “truth, justice and the American way.” Superman is America's hero. He is also an undocumented immigrant.

As Superman's story goes, his parents launch him from his home planet, Krypton, before it explodes, and he lands (without immigration papers) on a farm in Kansas. The couple who owns the farm raises the child as an all-American boy who keeps his superpowers secret until he becomes an adult. Like many undocumented immigrants, however, Superman conceals his true identity and lives day-to-day through an alias — Clark Kent.

Superman's immigrant background is not accidental. Two sons of Jewish immigrants created the Superman character in the late 1930s as an all-powerful

figure who could miraculously save helpless victims from evil and defend American ideals. It was a time framed by the Great Depression, the Holocaust and World War II.

In today's political climate, with many clamoring for ramped-up enforcement against undocumented immigrants, will Americans choose legalization or deportation for Superman? Anti-Superman Web sites have already sprung up on the Internet precisely because of his immigration status. Some of the anti-immigrant rhetoric on the sites smacks of Nazi criticism condemning the Superman comic strip, which depicted the superhero fighting on the side of America against Hitler's Germany.

The way we choose to fix our broken immigration system will reflect our commitment to the ideals Superman represents. A system that focuses on legalization shows our capacity for compassion and willingness to stand with some of the most vulnerable individuals in our communities. A beacon of light, like Superman. A system that emphasizes enforcement and deportation turns a blind eye to those who come to

America's shores seeking a better life for themselves and their families — and who, in the process, do so much to enhance America. Supporters of the enforcement approach want to make the immigrant experience so painful that others will abandon the journey. Their success depends on their ability to extinguish the light that makes America shine.

Superman's immigration status has never been a barrier to our willingness to welcome all the good that he does and for which he stands. I hope that the U.S. Congress will bring changes to our immigration system that enable America to embrace undocumented immigrants, as we do Superman. When we see the Superman symbol, we should recognize that it represents more than just one individual, but 13 million undocumented immigrants yearning for truth, justice and the American way.

Ryan Stark Lilienthal practices immigration law in Princeton, and recently served as the acting executive director of the New Jersey Immigration Policy Network (NJIPN). He serves on the Board of NJIPN and the advisory board of the Latin American Legal Defense and Education Fund.